

Solidarity for the Shy: Achieving Critical Mass

The idea is simple: once a month, people meet up in the center of the city with their bikes and then go on a ride through the city together, taking over the streets through sheer numbers. There's little explicit politics — with the exception of a distaste for “car culture” — and no leaders or official organizers. The whole thing, the (unofficial) website explains, is a “xerocracy”: pass out xeroxes of your proposal and maybe people will follow it. Sounds like fun.

I finally got myself together enough to go this month and, half an hour before starting time, hopped on my bike and headed over. Unfortunately I didn't look at the directions all that carefully and ended up getting lost in Boston. At one point I made a wrong turn and found myself trapped in the middle of a major highway, facing the wrong direction, and with little opportunity to make it to the side. Somehow, though, I managed to escape.

I got lost several more times and became increasingly frustrated with Boston's loopy street plan. Forget about being bike-friendly, this city isn't even car-friendly. As I repeatedly reversed my path, I figured I had no doubt missed the event. Just as well, I figured, since my leg muscles were aching from a heavy day of running yesterday and the sky was so cloudy that rain seemed inevitable. Still, I figured, I should at least try to find the location of the meetup for next time.

I made sure to bring nothing with me save the key to my apartment (both for aerodynamism and in case I got arrested — in New York, the police have been known to harass and arrest CMers for “parading without a permit”) so I don't know what time I arrived, but I do know how my face lit up when I saw the mass of bicycles and cyclists arranged at the park, even as the wind was trying to blow me over.

The park was a small right triangle, taking up less than half the block. On one side was a farmer's market, closing up shop for the day. On the other was a small protest about Israel's invasion of Lebanon, with many waving Lebanese flags and a speaker on a podium (whose voice was amplified by portable radios his associates carried around the crowd) discussed the tragedy of the invasion. A fat balding man waved a sign reading “Moderate Muslims: Help US Fight Islamonazism”, but things were otherwise quite civil.

Finally, on the hypotenuse, were the cyclists, just standing and chatting. By the time I'd made my way over to them, I noticed they were biking around in a circle together, so I joined in, smiling at the sight. We all biked around for a while until someone shouted “Mike, go right!” Mike did, exiting onto the street, and the crowd followed.

For the most part, I tried to stay in the middle of the pack. Bikes rode on all sides of me, while cars were stopped in their tracks. Frustrated, many of them pounded on their horns. In response, the crowd imitated their honk, except shouting “woohoo” as the noise, as if the cars were cheering them on.

We were particularly amused at the sight of a duck tour stopped in its tracks. I didn't catch what happened next, but from what I heard, the duck tour tried to break into the mass and ended up running right into the car next to it, greatly amusing all the massers.

Before we started, I overheard someone discussing about how last time a car tried to break into the mass as it was passing by. He said this no so much in anger but rather in amazement at the audacity of the idea. If the mass had any opinions, it definitely felt that the street was rightly its.

To protect against future such incursions, a couple people with long bikes stood in front of cars at intersections, acting as human barricades, then sprinting back to the front of the mass so they could do it again. At one intersection, they even tried to placate the cars. “Oh, don't worry, we” just be a second, just hold on one sec,” they shouted too the cars, which the mass found hilarious.

It was probably just as well the cars stayed put. Once one managed to break into it the mass, but quickly found itself stymied, like a bewildered bear suddenly finding itself in the middle of a swarm of honeybees.

When cars asked what we were all doing, we responded that we'd simply decided to go out for a bike ride. When pedestrians asked, however, we shouted “Critical Mass!” Still, despite our vehiclism, some cars did explicitly shout their support for Critical Mass.

Throughout I've been referring to the mass as a single entity, but it didn't really feel like one. While there certainly were a lot of bikes, and together we formed quite an imposing swarm, but despite engaging it a coordinated activity, we related mostly as individuals, most people just talking to the friends they'd come with. For the most part, there just wasn't much to talk about. I was riding my weirdo bike, so a lot of people said something like “sweet bike”, but the conversation didn't go far beyond “did you build it?” Bikes were, perhaps, the only thing we had in common. And even casual smalltalk seems exceedingly awkward in such a situation. American education, it has been said, is about learning how to be alone in a crowd. Perhaps its not surprising then that it also teaches how to be alone at a mass protest.

The group, however, did make some attempt at community. When some began falling behind, they'd shout “mass up!” encouraging the others to slow down and catch up with the group. But this was more an issue of practicality than community, though, as a dispersed mass had less effect.

We winded around the city of Boston for a while. Cambridge is some complex and entertaining, and I'm such a loner and stay-insider, that I rarely find myself across the river in Boston. That's probably a shame, because from what I see of it, the city's quite nice. I suppose I must have been in the North End, which I gather is the nice neighborhood, but I didn't realize how much so. The streets turned into long promenades upon which men in dashing suits would dash and attractive women walked their dogs. The houses were intricate constructions of brick and, from the outside at least, appeared exceedingly elegant. The whole scene reminded me of the expensive parts of Manhattan. A fancy shopping district was just blocks away.

After touring this part of the city, with so many twists and turns that I completely lost track of where we were, we turned up at the bridge to MIT. Storm clouds provided a backdrop to the horizon and as we crossed we saw bolt of lightning come down from the clouds and connect with some tall building. I wasn't thrilled about getting my bike wet, but I figured that as long as we were heading in the direction of my apartment, I might as well continue on.

We rode up Mass Ave, Cambridge's main street, past a noticeably friendlier crowd of passersby. By the time we'd gotten half-way to Harvard Square though, the rain started coming down, very quickly accelerating to full sheets and then to buckets. The wind was blowing so hard that the rain drops attacked my face like darts, making my eyes sting. Even when I put my hand above my eyes for protection, they managed to work their way around it and straight into my eyeballs. In short order, I quickly became soaked through and through. It was a good thing I brought nothing save those keys.

The massers, for the most part, embraced the rain, throwing their hands in the air and cheering. And, since I had nothing to worry about getting wet (except the bike, which had already been left out in the rain one too many times), I did the same. It was liberating.

As we passed Harvard Square, the rain started pouring down even harder, flooding the streets with water in which our bikes left beautiful trails. We headed into a tunnel, screaming the entire length. Then we stopped at the firehouse at the end, waiting for the rest to catch up, until someone shouted "let's go again!" and we headed back into the tunnel in the other direction, again screaming. It was this point that we began to turn around and head back to Boston, though by a circuitous route I'd never seen before and didn't quite understand. As we turned away from my apartment, I thought about taking this chance to make my exit and head home, but somehow riding home alone seemed more dangerous than continuing on inside the protective bubble of the mass. So I continued. The rain quickly died down, to the annoyance of some riders. 'That's all you got?' one shouted. 'Come on!'

By the time we got back to the bridge to Boston, I was feeling kind of tired and couldn't quite force myself to make it all the way up and, in any event, wasn't quite sure whether I should continue on with everyone. The group had thinned significantly by this point, with people presumably peeling off as we passed their houses. I decided to save the full tour for another time and turned around to head back home.

Despite being physically tired and thoroughly soaked, I was exhilarated. It was the most fun I'd ever had on a bicycle, despite its oddities and flaws. I couldn't wait to tell my friends.

As I rode home, I apparently committed some traffic error, leading some jerk in a car to shout 'Get the fuck off the road, you ass!' It didn't faze me at all, though. 'Get the fuck off *my* road,' I thought.

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